

# VU Research Portal

## Sadomasochism and the Apocalypse of John

Smit, P.B.A.

### **published in**

Biblical Interpretation  
2018

### **DOI (link to publisher)**

[10.1163/15685152-00261P05](https://doi.org/10.1163/15685152-00261P05)

### **document version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

### **document license**

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

### **citation for published version (APA)**

Smit, P. B. A. (2018). Sadomasochism and the Apocalypse of John: Exegesis, Sensemaking and Pain. *Biblical Interpretation*, 26(1), 90-112. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685152-00261P05>

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

### **E-mail address:**

[vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl](mailto:vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl)

# Sadomasochism and the Apocalypse of John: Exegesis, Sensemaking and Pain

*Peter-Ben Smit*

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Netherlands

*p.b.a.smit@vu.nl*

## Abstract

This essay proceeds from a modern sensitivity with regard to suffering and violence in canonical texts and draws on a modern phenomenon, sadomasochism (in particular masochism and appertaining theory, enhanced with theory concerning torture and pain), in order to understand the dynamics of suffering and its interpretation in the Apocalypse of John. The result of the paper is a contribution to the question what role pain and suffering play in the Apocalypse of John, as well as to the question to what extent comparing contemporary cultural phenomena and their analysis can contribute to the understanding of ancient texts. The paper also seeks to move beyond the rather pejorative and unnuanced use of the term ‘sadomasochistic’ in relation to the Apocalypse of John that has been used here and there in order to condemn the violence contained in the work (and, in the process, shedding rather shady light on BDSM practitioners).

## Keywords

Revelation of John – torture – sadomasochism – suffering – martyrdom

---

\* For the development of the argument presented in this paper, the author is indebted to the presentation of Prof. dr. Michael Labahn on fear in the Apocalypse of John in the New Testament Research Colloquium of 2 October 2015 and to discussions with Jennifer Bayne (who was gracious enough to also proofread the text and to improve its style), Wytse Versteeg, Miriam Huizenga, and received encouragement from the Rev. Sam Brelo. The paper was discussed at the New Testament Research Colloquium at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam on 30 November 2015 and received valuable comments from its members. A further debt of gratitude is owed to the anonymous reviewers of *Biblical Interpretation*.

## Introduction: Exegesis, Apocalypse and Sadomasochism

The present essay proceeds from a modern sensitivity with regard to suffering and violence in canonical texts (even if this concern is not just modern). It draws on a modern phenomenon, sadomasochism (in particular masochism and appertaining theory, enhanced with theory concerning torture and pain), in order to understand the dynamics of suffering and its interpretation in the Apocalypse of John. In doing so, new light is shed on the role of the suffering of the faithful in relation to the attitude of the deity in the only canonical Christian apocalypse. It will be argued that the Apocalypse of John is a witness to the fact that the meaning of the torture, suffering and other forms of marginalization that the persecuted have to endure, is not, in the end, fully controlled by the torturers, but that there is, in fact, space for renegotiating its meaning. There is, often, although not always, room left for agency on the part of the victim, even if only in some cases or after the fact, in the process of coping.

## Suffering and the Apocalypse

Suffering is a major theme in the Apocalypse of John, as are questions of control and power; both those following the Lamb and those following others, such as a variety of beasts and other apocalyptic adversaries of the Lamb and its followers, suffer. Such suffering is virtually always divinely condoned, or even inflicted directly, while the entire plot of the work hinges on the question regarding who is ultimately in charge of the world and its inhabitants. Such observations have led many to problematize the last book of the New Testament canon theologically and ethically,<sup>1</sup> not least due to doubtful forms of glorification of suffering in the history of its interpretation, or the indulging in violence and torture of the enemies of the 'in group' that is beyond one's wildest (sadomasochistic) fantasies (or maybe precisely appealing to such latent fantasies in the interpreter's mind) and can seem to border on the pathologi-

1 A good overview can be found in Moises Mayordomo, 'Gewalt in der Johannesoffenbarung als theologisches Problem', in Thomas Schmeller, Martin Ebner and Rudolf Hoppe (eds.), *Die Offenbarung des Johannes. Kommunikation im Konflikt* (Freiburg: Herder, 2013), pp. 107–136, and the (plentiful) literature referred to there. See also, for instance, Tobias Nicklas, 'The Eschatological Battle According to the Book of Revelation: Perspectives on Revelation 19.11–21.22', in Pieter G.R. de Villiers and Jan Willem van Henten (eds.), *Coping with Violence in the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 227–44. This volume does not contain references to sadomasochism.

cal.<sup>2</sup> Here, a somewhat different perspective will be proposed: the psychology of certain kinds of sadomasochism will be employed to argue that in the Apocalypse of John the suffering of the faithful is turned into an instrument of communion with God, and with it the body receives a mediating, quasi-sacramental, function that subverts the power relations in the 'real world'. The kind of sadomasochism referred to here can be understood as highly cultured forms of (sexual) fetishism (the charging with meaning or sensation of objects or practices, e.g. sexual organs, but also other bodily parts that can become 'sexually charged'), in which, through an intricate interplay of power and control, submission and dominance, pain, torture, and ensuing humiliation and dependence become key ways through which a relationship or (even if only) an encounter is enacted. In addition to this, the paper will also draw on the study of the rituality of torture as a further heuristic tool for understanding what takes place in the Apocalypse of John. All of this will be further amplified by taking into account scholarship on pain and its interpretation as a topic of overarching significance. In doing so, this paper explores in relation to the Apocalypse of John Sarah Coakley's observation that 'the way in which we *interpret* pain is all important for the mode of our suffering it'.<sup>3</sup> Also, the paper is more interested in those suffering than the one(s) inflicting it, thus pursuing a slightly different trajectory than, for instance, Moore, who, taking his cue from texts such as Rev. 22.3 ('and his slaves will worship him' [Moore's translation]), focuses largely on the deity, rather than on this deity's subjects that created this text about the deity, as they themselves appear in it.<sup>4</sup> In order to achieve all of this, brief outlines will first be provided of heuristic tools just mentioned;

- 2 For this, often the term 'sadomasochistic' is used as well, be it in a pejorative and pathologizing sense, see, for an example (herself rejecting this classification): Catherine Keller, 'Ms. Calculating the Endtimes: Additions and Conversation', in Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins (eds.), *A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John* (London: T&T Clark International, 2009), p. 215; see also Arthur P. Mendel, *Vision and Violence* (Ann Harbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 305. See further also Tina Pippin and J. Michael Clark, 'Revelation/Apocalypse', in Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West and Thomas Bohache (eds.), *The Queer Bible Commentary* (London: SCM, 2006), pp. 760-68, which refers to Philip Greven, *Spare the Child: The Religious Roots of Punishment and the Psychological Impact of Physical Abuse* (New York: Vintage, 1990), p. 211. The pathological and the fantastical are both addressed in these writings.
- 3 Sarah Coakley, 'Introduction', in Sarah Coakley and Kay Kaufman Shelemay (eds.), *Pain and Its Transformations: The Interface of Biology and Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 1-2. The contents of this edited volume are very illustrative of the interpreted nature of pain and suffering and thus provide an important background to this paper.
- 4 Stephen D. Moore, 'The Beatific Vision as a Posing Exhibition: Revelation's Hypermasculine Deity', *JSNT* 60 (1995), pp. 27-55 (28).

these tools will then be used as lenses for interpreting a number of representative verses from the Apocalypse. The result of the paper will be a contribution to the question on the role pain and suffering play in the Apocalypse of John, as well as to the question on how comparing contemporary cultural phenomena and their social-scientific analysis can contribute to the understanding of ancient texts. Such a comparison might be useful as such, but I want to also suggest that contemporary interpreters of the Apocalypse of John always interpret this book through the lens of their own culture, and doing so consciously, as is the case here, may well bring a greater hermeneutical advantage. The paper also seeks to move beyond the rather pejorative and often quite unnuanced use of the term 'somasochistic' in relation to the Apocalypse of John that has been used here and there in order to condemn the violence contained in the work (and, in the process, shedding less than positive light on those engaging in somasochistic practices).<sup>5</sup> The suffering of others, as it is inflicted upon them by the deity, could possibly be illumined by the use of theory concerning BDSM, but that will not be the topic of this paper.

With regard to contemporary research on the Apocalypse of John, this paper further explores a line of interpretation that is much concerned with literary and visionary practices of resistance, sense making and coping, something typically associated with early Jewish and Christian apocalypses, and adds to these the dimension of 'literary pain management' through the voicing and ensuing interpretation of pain and suffering in the context of the relationship among self, God and oppressors. In doing so, it takes into account that the language and conceptuality that John's Apocalypse uses in relation to martyrdom, faithfulness and suffering are part of a broader tradition and also have an exhortative function, as it has, for example, been explored by Van Henten and Kelhoffer.<sup>6</sup> However, it also explores something that precedes exhortation: processes of voicing, verbalization and (relational) sense making, which are

5 See the works cited in note 2 above; usually attention is paid only to agency on the part of the 'dominant' partner and contemporary theory about somasochism is hardly taken into account. This paper travels a different route, by drawing heavily on such theory and focuses on the 'submissive' partner and this partner's agency.

6 Jan Willem van Henten, 'The Concept of Martyrdom in Revelation', in Jörg Frey, James A. Kelhoffer and Franz Tóth (eds.), *Die Johannesapokalypse: Kontexte, Konzepte und Rezeption* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), pp. 553-85; and James A. Kelhoffer, 'The Relevance of Revelation's Date and the Imperial Cult for John's Appraisal of the Value of Christians' Suffering in Revelation 1-3', in Frey, Kelhoffer and Tóth (eds.), *Die Johannesapokalypse*, pp. 587-618.

closer to coping than to exhortation, but still more subversive than comfort alone.<sup>7</sup>

Before doing all of this, a bit of a disclaimer may be needed. The point of this essay is *not* to argue that the Apocalypse of John is a sadomasochistic piece of literature, but to advocate the use of (particular examples of) theory concerned with (particular kinds of) sadomasochism and torture to approach early Christianity heuristically. It is also *not* interested in arguing that sadomasochism derives genealogically from early Christian asceticism or the like, as has been done frequently and, just as often, without sufficient nuance or historical awareness.<sup>8</sup> (In fact, despite rather poor jokes about Jesus forgetting his safe word on the cross and therefore dying,<sup>9</sup> the utter and [at least seemingly fatal] abandonment of Jesus at the cross has little to do with sadomasochistic eroticism.) Also, the desire of St. Ignatius of Antioch to be annihilated with Christ and like Christ is part of discourses that, I would submit, are not the direct precursors of contemporary sadomasochism. These discourses are different from the 'agonism' that is part of the rhetoric of the Apocalypse of John (the same would be true for Paul's 'agonizing' journey with Christ). The point of this essay is entirely heuristic in nature and relates to early Christian coping with suffering in a particular text – that is, the Apocalypse of John – rather than arguing that God is a Dominatrix (or Master) or that Christians are masochists by nature. I am also not particularly interested in exploring the Apocalypse of

7 See, for example, Nicklas, 'Eschatological Battle', who also has an interest in morally justifying the imagery of the Apocalypse and regulating its use. For an emphasis on comfort, see also Heinz Giesen, 'Ermutigung zur Glaubenstreue in schwerer Zeit. Zum Zweck der Johannesoffenbarung', in Giesen (ed.), *Studien zur Johannesapokalypse* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2000), pp. 214–27; and Ferdinand Hahn, 'Die Johannesoffenbarung als Geschichtsdeutung und Trostbuch', *Studien zum Neuen Testament II. Bekenntnisbildung und Theologie in urchristlicher Zeit* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), p. 639. Christopher A. Frilingos proposes that the Apocalypse of John/Book of Revelation is a kind of 'coping literature, as it temporarily allows the reader to 'rise above the conflicts of the present' (*Spectacles of Empire: Monsters, Martyrs, and the Book of Revelation* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004], p. 3); in other words, 'the Book of Revelation offered to early Christians a myth that temporarily eased the tension between "what ought to be and what is"' (Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire*, p. 4).

8 See, for instance, the remarks of Jeremy R. Carrette, 'Intense Exchange: Sadomasochism, Theology and the Politics of Late Capitalism', *Theology & Sexuality* 11 (2005), pp. 11–30. In cases in which Christianity is played out against, supposedly more joyful, body affirming, etc. religions, such as Greco-Roman religions, lack of knowledge of the latter is often more obvious than insight into the former.

9 See Staci Newmahr, *Playing on the Edge: Sadomasochism, Risk, and Intimacy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), p. 2.

John as a sexual or erotic text in the narrower sense of the word (although I am keen on exploring how a potentially revolting aspect of a relationship, suffering, becomes a constructive part of this relationship and, in a way, even a source of pleasure, or, at least, pride). I am not suggesting that a fuller consideration of such topics might not prove fruitful, however 'indecent' theologically;<sup>10</sup> nor am I suggesting that this is the only valid perspective or approach. The approach chosen here helps to see and consider things that have, so far, not been discussed extensively, even if both what is being said here might, theoretically, also be discovered through other lenses that possess a different kind of contextuality or philosophical background.<sup>11</sup> Another thing that this essay is not interested in, although it is an important topic, is the (eroticized and gendered) violence used vis-à-vis others than the faithful;<sup>12</sup> here, the focus is on coping by the faithful and the relationship with the divinely sanctioned suffering of the faithful (this also means that other kinds of suffering and ideological or theological implications cannot be pursued here).

### The Dynamics of Sadomasochism

When moving beyond pejorative interpretations of sadomasochism, and looking at it with a little more self-restraint when it comes to encountering that what is different (or maybe all too familiar, lived out or not, even if only as unacknowledged fantasies as the recent commercial and popular success of E.L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey* may indicate), it becomes clear that sadomas-

<sup>10</sup> See Marcella Althaus-Reid's programmatic *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> One may think of reading the Apocalypse of John in relation to the oeuvre of a thinker such as Viktor Frankl, psychologist, philosopher and concentration camp survivor (see, e.g., his *Trotzdem. Ja zum Leben sagen* [Vienna: Jugend und Volk, 1946]), or of a contemporary novelist, such as the Dutch Wytse Versteeg, who, in her work, also explores questions of humanity and its dissolution, most recently in her *Quarantaine* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2015) and *Grime* (Amsterdam: Querido, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> On which see the critical treatment of Tina Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies: The Biblical End of the World in Text and Image* (London: Routledge, 1999), esp. pp. 117-25. See also idem, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), esp. pp. 69-86. See further also Moore, 'Vision', which interprets John's Apocalypse as a male fantasy about a hypermasculine God. Frilingos provides also an insightful discussion on masculinity and the arena; in his case, one of gladiators and martyrdom; see *Spectacles of Empire*, pp. 32-35 (cf. p. 115).



ochism, as a particular cultural expression of sexuality,<sup>13</sup> is a highly aestheticized form of sexuality that pivots upon the (ritualized) exchange of power and typically, and as a consequence of the former, of pain.<sup>14</sup> (Such exchanges often take place at the background of previous or ongoing experiences of pain in 'real life', whether physical, social or psychological.) As a consequence, sado-masochistic eroticism can well be understood as a particular form of sexual fetishism in which the (painful and humiliating) manipulation of the body (often not even through direct contact with another body),<sup>15</sup> often through prac-

- 
- 13 The interrelationship between sadomasochistic (sex) culture and culture at large is a debated one; some would argue that sadomasochism replicates and makes visible through a process of enlargement and theatricalization the structures of power and desires dominating (capitalist) society as a whole and which, when having leftist (or compatible theological) sympathies, is to be countered. See for this perspective, for example, Lynn S. Chancer, *Sadomasochism in Everyday Life: The Dynamics of Power and Powerlessness* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Graham Ward, 'Theology and Cultural Sadomasochism', *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 78 (2002), pp. 2-10. Quite a different and (to the present author) more convincing perspective is offered by Romana Byrne, *Aesthetic Sexuality: A Literary History of Sadomasochism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), esp. pp. 127-58, where Byrne argues that the complex interplay of power in sadomasochistic relations, in fact, turns it to an alternative aesthetic to what is dominant in society. This seems to be quite in line with the subcultural character of (much if not most) sadomasochism and the modes of hyperbole, mimicry and 'play' that characterize it, as well as with its emphasis on partnership, trust and vulnerability; however, as soon as sadomasochism is 'mainstreamed', the picture may well change. See, for example, the study of Margot D. Weiss, 'Mainstreaming Kink: The Politics of BDSM Representation in U.S. Popular Media', in Peggy J. Kleinplatz and Charles Moser (eds.), *Sadomasochism: Powerful Pleasures* (Binghamton: Harrington Park, 2006), pp. 103-133. This particular debate could be furthered by drawing on the work of, for instance, Slavoj Žižek, but space is lacking here. For an early consideration by Žižek of the dynamics of sadomasochism, see his programmatic *Enjoy Your Symptom: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (London: Routledge, 2001), esp. p. 263, where the agency of the masochistic (suffering) subject is emphasized; this will be of importance for the remainder of this essay.
- 14 See for such a definition, for example, Byrne, *Aesthetic Sexuality*, pp. 5-6, which relies heavily on the work of Michel Foucault. Similarly, see Staci Newmahr, 'Power Struggles: Pain and Authenticity in SM Play', *Symbolic Interaction* 33 (2010), pp. 389-411. For a strong awareness that any discussion of sadomasochism always depends on its construction and according understanding: Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 100-124. For introductory pieces on sadomachism, see the entries in Alan Soble (ed.), *Sex from Plato to Paglia: M-Z* (Westport: Greedwood, 2006), pp. 949-60.
- 15 This, in fact, enhances the potential for comparing human sadomasochistic relationships to human-divine relationships.



tices that are akin to torture, even if they are different from 'real' torture. These practices are engaged on the basis of mutual trust as it is (often) expressed in a contract and with safeguards generally in place.<sup>16</sup> Practices which are not always associated with (sexual) pleasure (or in ways that are not directly associated with it) are turned into a site for experiencing (sexual) pleasure and used as instrument for the construction and performance of the relationship between, in the case of sadomasochism, the dominant and submissive partners – in other cases of sexual fetishism, the dominant/submissive relationship is of much lesser importance; given the importance of suffering in precisely sado-masochistic relationships, it is helpful to focus on these relationships.<sup>17</sup> Beyond the cultivation and fetishizing of sometimes rather surprising (since painful and humiliating) bodily practices as sources of sexual pleasure with all the physical, social, psychological and even spiritual complexities that belong to this (including a very complex interplay and exchange of power, which is never one-sided),<sup>18</sup> one can view a longer term sadomasochistic relationship as a means for building up a(n often surprisingly equal) partnership. In this partnership the ritualized and therefore controlled use of forms of torture constitute a form of sexual communication and agreed upon exchange of power, in which mutual trust and openness is a key factor: the one on the 'receiving end' of torture (who may, in fact, be in control of the ritual as a whole) expresses trust vis-à-vis the other partner and surrenders to her/him; the one who 'deals out' the torture (thus fulfilling a more or less scripted role) accepts

- 
- 16 See for this emphasis on the contractual the account of Roland Boer, 'YHWH as Top: A Lost Targum', in Ken Stone (ed.), *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), pp. 76-105, which is as witty as it is well informed; see esp. pp. 98-103. See there also the references to the work of Gilles Deleuze, particularly his 'Coldness and Cruelty', in idem and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty and Venus in Furs* (trans. J. McNeill; New York: Zone, 1991), pp. 9-138, where Deleuze argues that the covenant or contract is the 'ideal form of the love relationship and its necessary precondition' (Boer, 'YHWH as Top', p. 98).
- 17 This would be along the lines of Michel Foucault's experience and understanding of sadomasochism; see Bob Plant, 'Playing Games/Playing us Foucault on Sadomasochism', *Philosophy Social Criticism* 33 (2007), pp. 531-61. For the transformation of pain in most forms of sadomasochistic sex, see Newmahr, 'Power Struggles'; for a (theologically informed) rejection of the fetishizing of pain in and of itself, see, Lauren Smelser White, 'The Petitionary Prayer of Gethsemane in the Event of Divine Desire: Faith's Undoing or Refiner's Fire', *The Other Journal* 12 (2013), pp. 23-31 (30).
- 18 In this respect, sadomasochistic practices also question the usefulness of categorizing practices as hetero- or homosexual; rather, as the pivot of it all is pain, power and control, it seems to be a kind of sexuality in its own right, well beyond a definition predicated upon categories of biological sex or gender.

the vulnerability of the other and needs to answer trust with trustfulness, while trusting the other to know one's limits. In other words, like 'normal' sex can be in a much more hidden (and therefore less controlled) way (which is all the more open to forms of abuse), sadomasochism is explicitly about an exchange of power and the cultivation of trust, wherefore it may well be in a good position to put a subversive 'spin' on general societal power relationships. Admittedly, much can go wrong (as it can in any sexual relationship), and pathological forms of sadism will end up having little regard for the partner at stake, while similarly pathological forms of surrender and submissiveness can have difficulties with boundaries.<sup>19</sup> Noting that sadomasochistic practices and their acceptance, even embrace of pain are not the only instance in contemporary societies in which pain is accepted, even glorified – wars and sports would be cases in point (Asad does not make the connection, but the agreement with 'agonistic' thought in the Greco-Roman world is a perfect one)<sup>20</sup> – and that agency is very much with the 'bottom' in such relationships, Asad sums up sadomasochistic practices with these characteristics in an essay on torture:<sup>21</sup>

1. A dominant-submissive relationship;
2. A giving and receiving of pain that is pleasurable to both parties;
3. Fantasy and/or role playing on the part of one or both parties;
4. A conscious humbling of one partner by the other (humiliation);
5. Some form of fetish involvement;
6. The acting out of one or more ritualized interactions (bondage, flagellation, etc.).<sup>22</sup>

With this (and excluding, at least for the purposes of this essay, further, and one might say, deeper, layers of psychoanalytic theorizing about sadomasochistic relationships, such as those developed by Freud, Deleuze and Lacan, who appear in conversation with each other in Boer's article, 'YHWH as Top'), all sorts of questions of power, control (of body and mind, and of the mind

19 Even if this is a subject of debate amongst those engaging in sadomasochist practices: while some would argue that the line is to be drawn at anything that goes beyond SSC ('Safe, Sane and Consensual'), others would say that practices based on principles like RACK (risk aware consensual kink' or 'consensual no consent' and involving such dynamics as 'edge play' are even more profound expressions of mutual trust. This, however, is not the topic of this essay.

20 See Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, p. 113.

21 Asad notes that it is all about 'subjecting oneself' (*Formations of the Secular*, p. 118). See also Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom*, p. 263.

22 Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, p. 119.

through the body, such as through the creation of suspense and delaying any sort of 'climax'),<sup>23</sup> submission and domination come to the fore. In theorizing about sadomasochistic erotic practices, it has also become apparent that in at least some sadomasochistic practices, those initiated by a desire for submission and an experience of pleasure through pain (and the denial or postponement of pleasure), much depends on the agency of precisely the 'bottom' rather than on the 'top'. As Deleuze puts it, 'The masochistic contract implies not only the necessity of the victim's consent, but his [*sic*] ability to persuade, and his [*sic*] pedagogical and judicial efforts to train his [*sic*] torturer'.<sup>24</sup> The bottom often, if not generally, determines the sadomasochistic contract, so agency is with the person in this role in creative and potentially controlling way. This has been the case ever since the 'invention' of modern-day masochism by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (the term 'sadomasochism' is a later invention of the psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing,<sup>25</sup> who couples the practices of De Sade with those of von Sacher-Masoch; the term might, for that reason, be less helpful heuristically as it suggests a combination of equal sadistic and masochistic drives in a relationship that is not always there). In his (in)famous *Venus in Furs*, Sacher-Masoch rather persistently *demands* that his Wanda humiliate him – and this he does in earnest.<sup>26</sup> A sadomasochistic relationship can be, and often is, constructed from the masochist's rather than the sadist's perspective; the sadist is, in fact, frequently constructed out of the masochist's perspective (and the appertaining desire to relate in a particular way to the sadist).<sup>27</sup> When studying (the interpretation) of pain and suffering in the Apocalypse of John, the masochistic side of the sadomasochistic story might be the most fruitful to explore further. This line of thought can be extended with reference to Freeman's work on time and temporality in sadomasochism. Part of her argument is that by engaging in a play with a(n historicized) script, sadomasochism can be a way of reconfiguring present experiences in terms of those of the past and its overcoming or, conversely, it can be a mode of working

23 See Boer, 'YHWH as Top', p. 101; Boer takes his cue from Deleuze: 'Waiting and suspense are the essential characteristics of the masochistic experience' ('Coldness and Cruelty', pp. 70–71). See also Linda Hart, *Between the Body and the Flesh: Performing Sadomasochism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 103.

24 Deleuze, 'Coldness and Cruelty', p. 65; Boer, 'YHWH as Top', p. 100.

25 In his *Neue Forschungen auf dem Gebiet der Psychopathia sexualis* (Stuttgart: von Ferdinand Enke, 1890).

26 See Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Fur* (trans. Fernanda Savage; Mineola: Dover, 2012), p. 80 (his demand follows on Wanda's remark that she hates 'play-acting').

27 See Boer, 'YHWH as Top', p. 89; see also p. 97 for reference to divine-human relationships (97).

through uncontrolled experiences of hurt and humiliation from the past in a potentially empowering and healing, as well as controlled and scripted, way.<sup>28</sup>

Why would such practices of the ritualized exchange of power and the fetishizing of pain be of relevance to the interpretation of the Apocalypse of John? One answer to that question, which will be developed further below, is that a case can be made, informed by the dynamics of sadomasochism as outlined above, that suffering is fetishized in the Apocalypse of John in a manner not unlike it can take place in a sadomasochistic relationship.

Having thus outlined some relevant aspects of the dynamics of sadomasochism, it is now possible to draw attention to the rituality of torture and the agency involved in understanding it, both as a subject undergoing torture and as a spectator of it.

### The Rituality of Torture

Quite in line with sadomasochistic practices as practices of ritualized torture, torture, in fact, has come to be understood as possessing its own kind of rituality, particularly involving the exclusion of a person from society and even from humanity through extreme non-recognition.<sup>29</sup> As Kuch notes:

Torture is not just about absolute power and absolute powerlessness, it is about demonstrating absolute power and being exposed in one's powerlessness. This exposed powerlessness, on the one hand, and the demonstrated power, on the other, is the humiliating truth of torture.... In this sense, torture has an essentially symbolic dimension. And this demonstration of powerlessness has to do with recognition, or, more specifically, with a loss of recognition. To be exposed in one's absolute powerlessness implies, precisely in its symbolic dimension, a radical loss of recognition.

28 See Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Bind: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), esp. pp. 137-69.

29 Hannes Kuch, 'The Rituality of Humiliation: Exploring Symbolic Vulnerability', in Paulus Kaufmann, Hannes Kuch, Christian Neuhäuser and Elaine Webster (eds.), *Humiliation, Degradation, Dehumanization: Human Dignity Violated* (London: Springer, 2011), pp. 37-56. Kuch writes, 'In the course of torture, the victim loses more and more his reference to the world, being thrown back to his own bodily existence. The victim thus gradually loses his or her human voice.... At the end, he or she can but scream like an animal, or only just breath and stutter. This, again, is a dimension of the loss of recognition which the victim suffers: to be excluded from humankind by being reduced to a merely bodily being' (p. 53).

Autonomy, freedom, or agency are of central importance in our cultural values, and their loss may be a reason for far-reaching devaluation; that is, an extreme loss of recognition.... [T]orture, then, is constitutively linked with symbolic, theatrical, or ritual elements as well as with the question of recognition and its loss.<sup>30</sup>

It can be demonstrated how this would function when considering the crucifixion.<sup>31</sup> In the case of crucifixion, a person that had flaunted imperial authority was dramatically and symbolically excluded from society and denied all humanity. This understanding of crucifixion as a ritualized form of torture is one final reason to understand crucifixion as a ritual, specifically as a political ritual and even more in particular as a ritual of torture. Such would also apply to other forms of torture, physical, social, psychological, economic, etc. On this basis, it is also possible to apply the insights of Butler concerning ritual to the ritual of torture, following the lead of Beard and Georgia in this respect.<sup>32</sup> Butler notes that 'ritual is material to the extent that it is productive, that is, it produces the belief that appears to be "behind" it'.<sup>33</sup> In relation to rituals celebration Roman triumph and dominance, Georgia takes this to mean that:

The visual materiality of the triumphal ritual produced the 'belief' in Roman power, imperial divinity, and the global scope of Roman authority, but insofar as this materiality was constructed by *foreign* objects, people and symbols, the triumph itself became a complex of cultural exchange that could be exploited by Roman subjects even as they were exploited by Roman authorities.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, the 'staging' of imperial power worked both ways.<sup>35</sup> The potential of the exploitation of this 'cultural exchange' by the Roman subjects depended on two things. First, one needs to take into account the fact that one result of displaying power and dominance publicly, using the medium of the bodies of

30 Kuch, 'Rituality of Humiliation', p. 53.

31 See also my 'Crucifixion? Crucifixion as a Failed Ritual in Phil. 2', *BTB* 46 (2016), pp. 12-24.

32 See Allan T. Georgia, 'Translating the Triumph: Reading Mark's Crucifixion Narrative against a Roman Ritual of Power', *JSNT* 36 (2013), pp. 17-38 (23); Mary Beard, *The Roman Triumph* (Boston: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 25.

33 Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 25.

34 Georgia, 'Translating the Triumph', p. 23.

35 For this, see also Frilingos' discussion of public executions (*noxii*) in his *Spectacles of Empire*, pp. 31-32.

defeated and subjected people, also means that these bodies are given center stage and place into the spotlight.<sup>36</sup> Of course, the intention of such a display was to underline Rome's control over these bodies. Nonetheless, the medium of the bodies as an interpretative surplus cannot be controlled. Put differently, and this is the second point, interpretation of such a theatrical display presents itself as a problem. Beard considers this to be a 'central dilemma for triumphal celebrations'<sup>37</sup> and notes that the question at stake is one that concerns all mass spectacles: 'how do you control the gaze of the viewer?'.<sup>38</sup> Thus, putting one's dominance and power on display through the medium of the bodies of the defeated meant for a victor to also surrender oneself to the evaluation of this display by the spectators. Therefore, depending on the medium of the bodies of his victims. The outcome of this process was never a certainty; through a different 'reading' of the humiliated bodies of the defeated (e.g. as the undeservedly humiliated bodies of noble royalty, or the like),<sup>39</sup> the persuasiveness of such a public ritual could well be undermined. Who saw what in the theatrically and ritually celebrated victory was, therefore, of the utmost important, both for the victor putting on the display and for those seeing it. In particular, the question of interpretation was one of high importance for the associates (kinship members, members of an ethnic group, clients, etc., etc.) of the person/s whose body/-ies was/were used as the medium for the public display of triumph. As Meeks notes, in relation to the death of Jesus, 'They faced a massive hermeneutical dilemma: interpret or despair. The movement did not despair. For the earliest formative remnant of them the paradoxical notion that God's anointed vice regent was ignominiously killed became the generative center of their beliefs'.<sup>40</sup> This remains a valuable insight, even if this statement contains a bit of a fallacy, because despairing takes place on the basis of a

36 Georgia notes in relation to Roman triumphal processions and celebrations in the city of Rome: '[T]he unquestionable result of Romans celebrating their victory was to give center stage to the victims of Roman military prowess' (Georgia, 'Translating the Triumph', p. 23).

37 Georgia, 'Translating the Triumph', p. 24.

38 Beard, *Roman Triumph*, p. 136. On the instability of 'seeing and being seen', see also Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire*, pp. 35-38.

39 All of these considerations have also consequences for the ritual community, that is, the community within which the ritual is performed. In the case of the crucifixion, this community is of a very large scale in the sense that, given that it concerns the performance of imperial authority, the Roman empire *qua* institution of power and authority is involved, including its claims and its (ultimate, historical and transcendent) legitimacy. Also, if the crucified person represented a particular group or community, the value of this community, its tradition and its sources of legitimization and claims to power are at stake.

40 Wayne Meeks, *Christ is the Question* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), pp. 76-77; see also Georgia, 'Translating the Triumph', pp. 17-18.

particular interpretation of an event. Thus, recognized victory – and in a society so preoccupied with public recognition as the Roman one, only such victory was real in any meaningful sense of the word – depended to a large extent on the interpretation of the (bodies of the) defeated by the public.<sup>41</sup> As soon as a ritual is performed publicly, therefore, ‘a mimetic sequence of presentation and representation that subjects the spectacle to viewers who necessarily introduce their own hermeneutic’<sup>42</sup> is initiated. This process and the ambiguity concerning the interpretation of the ritual that this produces are inherent to the way in which rituals function as rituals.<sup>43</sup> All of this is of relevance for the interpretation of the Apocalypse of John, given that from it results the idea that the meaning of torture (or other forms of marginalization, such as persecution) is not, in the end, controlled by the torturers, but that there is, in fact, space for renegotiating its meaning. There is some room left for agency on the part of the victim, even if only in some cases or after the fact.

### Unspeakable Pain and Creative Suffering in the Apocalypse of John

As is the case always, the proof of the pudding is in the eating and this applies to the use of the two lenses for interpreting the Apocalypse of John as well. First, the fetishizing of suffering is considered, next the effect of this on matters of agency in situations of persecution and marginalization, all of which will be prefaced by a few remarks on literature and pain. To be sure, what follows remains standing quite irrespective of the actual amount of suffering that John and his interlocutors had to deal with. His faith is constructed as a ‘precarious piety’, one always threatened by the outside world that is inherently evil and oppressive;<sup>44</sup> this faith always exists in a state of crisis.<sup>45</sup>

41 See Georgia, ‘Translating the Triumph’, p. 24.

42 Georgia, ‘Translating the Triumph’, p. 24.

43 Catherine Bell remarks that ‘symbols and symbolic actions not only fail to communicate clear and shared understandings, but the obvious ambiguity ... of symbolism may even be integral to its efficacy’ (Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992], p. 184).

44 See for this notion the contemporary study of Daan Beekers, *Precarious Piety: Pursuits of Faith among Young Muslims and Christians in the Netherlands* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2015). The suggestion of Luke A. Powery that ‘the tone of John, the preaching revelator, suggests that there is a crisis, whether it is an actual, perceived, or future one’ is felicitous (Powery, ‘Painful Praise: Exploring the Public Proclamation of the Hymns of Revelation’, *ThTo* 70 [2013], pp. 69–78 [71]).

45 See Powery, ‘Painful Praise’ as well as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), p. 24. Adela Yarbro Collins (*Crisis and Catharsis*:



Extreme pain, such as it is inflicted in torture or for other reasons beyond one's control, is a hyper-individualistic affair and, as a bodily experience, is located in a realm that can only be accessed in a very limited manner by conceptual thought or language.<sup>46</sup> Still, such communication about pain is a necessity in order to enable life, however incapacitated it may be, to become a social being again, to return from the subhuman, hyper-individualized state of a torture victim in the grip of and controlled by the pain inflicted upon him or her. Any speaking about pain is, therefore, 'pain management' already; it is a process of 'objectifying' pain and the aspect of the human being that it is inflicted upon. It is a way of sense-making that enables a person to recreate oneself, be in touch with a (more or less) meaningful life story and with others. The literary representation of pain and suffering as one encounters it in the Apocalypse of John is to be seen in this context. It is not pain or suffering itself, it is a literary and theologically well-developed representation on pain as a primary experience that is quite beyond language. Highly cultured writing about pain, as the Apocalypse of John contains, is a (literally [re]creative) way of dealing with pain, both in terms of coping and in terms of (subversively) regaining agency. This can be illuminated with reference to sadomasochistic, in particular masochistic ways of integrating pain into a relationship and even turning it into a source of pleasure.

---

*The Power of the Apocalypse* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984], pp. 84-110) refers to the social situation as a 'perceived crisis'.

- 46 See on this especially the framework proposed by Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), as well as the essays collected in Thomas J. Csordas (ed.), *Embodiment and Experience. The Existential Ground of Culture and Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), particularly Jean Jackson's 'Chronic Pain and the Tension between the Body as Subject and Object' (pp. 201-228) and E. Valentine Daniel's 'The Individual in Terror' (pp. 229-47). See also the essays in Arthur Kleinmann, Veena Das and Margeret Lock (eds.), *Social Suffering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), particularly Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman's 'The Appeal of Experience, The Dismay of Images: Cultural Appropriations of Suffering in Our Times' (pp. 1-23); David B. Morris' 'About Suffering: Voice, Genre, and Moral Community' (pp. 25-45); Veena Das' 'Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain' (pp. 67-91); Allan Young's 'Suffering and the Origins of Traumatic Memory' (pp. 245-60); Paul Farmer's 'On Suffering and Structural Violence: A View from Below' (pp. 261-83); and Talal Asad's 'On Torture, or Cruel, Inhuman, and Degrading Treatment' (pp. 285-308). Pain is dehumanizing; for a convincing literary description of a descent into a subhuman, isolated existence, where each form of communication, speech and touch begins to become impossible, see Wytse Versteeg, *Quarantaine* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2015). In a way, forms of torture that do not destroy the victim's sociability are not achieving their aim.

An interesting reference to suffering occurs in Rev. 2.10, where the seer is instructed to write to the angel of the church in Smyrna:

μηδὲν φοβοῦ ἃ μέλλεις πάσχειν. ἰδοὺ μέλλει βάλλειν ὁ διάβολος ἐξ ὑμῶν εἰς φυλακὴν ἵνα πειρασθῆτε καὶ ἔξετε θλίψιν ἡμερῶν δέκα. γίνου πιστὸς ἄχρι θανάτου, καὶ δώσω σοι τὸν στέφανον τῆς ζωῆς.

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. (NRSV)

A number of observations can be made here. To begin with, the 'angel' (and by consequence the church in Smyrna) is instructed not to fear suffering (πάσχειν), which, as such, can be a call to boldness in the face of imminent adversity. Next, the devil (ὁ διάβολος) is introduced as the one inflicting a particular form of suffering: imprisonment, which was in antiquity an even lesser joy than it is in many parts of today's Western world. While this could be seen as an indication that God is not behind the suffering, the remainder of the Apocalypse of John will problematize this and make the matter more complex. At the very least, God permits the suffering, even death, of the followers of the Lamb, likely as a form of testing (see also in this verse: 'the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested'). In general, in this last book of the New Testament, devils, beasts and the like appear in the end more as divine (ly sanctioned and temporary) instruments of testing<sup>47</sup> rather than actors of their own right in control of what is taking place on earth (which, in fact, is a major part of the literary strategy of the work as such).<sup>48</sup> Even more interesting is the final part of the verse, which relates remaining faithful with receiving a reward, the crown of life. In the subsequent verse, 2.11, this is restated in a formulaic way, typical for the letters to the churches in Revelation 2-3:

Ὁ ἔχων οὖς ἀκουσάτω τί τὸ πνεῦμα λέγει ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις. Ὁ νικῶν οὐ μὴ ἀδικηθῇ ἐκ τοῦ θανάτου τοῦ δευτέρου.

Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death. (NRSV).

47 In fact, imagining a(n otherwise unmanageable) source of pain, even within the own body, in terms of a monster is also a technique for coping with it, see, e.g., Jackson, 'Pain.'

48 See, e.g., Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), *passim*.

The agonistic imagery that is invoked here – that of conquering or being victorious – associates the suffering with a process of working towards one's salvation. This is decisive: suffering is now a way of relating to God and a means of salvation rather than something that is primarily destructive in nature. Later on in the Apocalypse (e.g. 19.5), the suffering and struggling of the faithful receives also another dimension that is more 'social' or 'horizontal' in nature: when the souls of the ones who have been butchered cry out from under the heavenly altar, asking God how long it will take to revenge them, the answer is that they will have to be patient a little longer, until the number of (blood) martyrs – who, as a consequence of their martyrdom, will be saved as well – will be complete. Thus, suffering and dealing with it, both in terms of enduring it as part of a struggle for salvation and, having been killed, enduring the ongoing (divinely sanctioned) persecution and lack of divine intervention and revenge, are transformed into a means of relating to both God and other devotees of the Lamb. Suffering thus becomes an instrument of relationship and, in a mode analogous to the experience of pleasure through pain in sadomasochistic practices, has the enjoyment of the 'prize' in the sense of a delayed (narrative) climax, which, in fact, only adds to the intensity of the experience of the relationship.<sup>49</sup> While fully aware of the difference between fetishizing pain that is inflicted anyway and turning pain into a constituent of a relationship and actively seeking a relationship in which such fetishized pain and suffering plays a constitutive role (but also assuming that the dynamics of the latter may shed light on the former), I suggest that here suffering, bodily and socially, is fetishized and turned into a performance of a relationship with God (rather than with the instrument through which the suffering is inflicted, which will be considered next) and thus into a source of pleasure. God permits the suffering, even inflicting it as a way of testing, but with an eye to improving and performing the divine-human relationship and in the hope of its blissful fulfillment. That such fulfillment is delayed, not quite *ad infinitum*, but that the end is quite clearly still a long time away in the Apocalypse of John, creates suspense and can, in the context of a (sado)masochistic relationship, be felt as a way of controlling the 'bottom', even if the 'bottom' experiences, precisely through this delay and waiting, an ever more intimate relationship with the 'top'.<sup>50</sup>

49 That this might make sense is also suggested by the description of early Christian martyrdom in the account of Perpetua and Felicitas. This account may well have a strong historical basis; regardless, note that the account depicts the moment of martyrdom as one without pain but rather one of enjoyment.

50 On suspense, delay, the body, and BDSM, see also Freeman, *Time Bind*, p. 161.

Having said this, the picture that thus emerges can be developed further with recourse to the rituality of torture, as it was introduced earlier. In particular, the question of control over the process of torture as a destructive force in order to achieve someone's physical, social, economic and spiritual marginalization and according dehumanization,<sup>51</sup> involving a total denial of agency on the part of the one undergoing it, is of importance. This is to say, as was outlined above, matters of control are key to any performance of torture, which is set up to indicate beyond any possible doubt as to who is in charge and who isn't. However, a successful performance of torture also depends on its acceptance as such, both by the one undergoing it and by onlookers, and that is something that can well be beyond the control of the torturer. In fact, the Apocalypse of John offers precisely a tactic that seeks to remove those that it addresses from the sphere of influence of those persecuting (i.e. torturing) them. Rather than acknowledging their control and submitting to it, the audience is invited to consider God to be the one in charge, and one who factually utilizes the devil (and the devil's associates) as a means for constructing a divine-human relationship, albeit one that involves fetishized suffering as the result of a willed submission to God (e.g. 'and his slaves will worship him', Rev. 22.3) and an acceptance of God's meting out of 'discipline' (to follow Moore and with him Foucault).<sup>52</sup> Those persecuting or torturing the community are thus denied any real or ultimate agency, which is, by contrast, relegated to God *and*, just as importantly, to the devotees of the Lamb, who now have an opportunity to regain their agency (and humanity) in the sense that their persecution/torture has now become a struggle in which they actually *can* win, even if the mode of such a victory is that of (pleasurable?) torture and (blissful?) death. Their apparent weakness, loss of control and passivity become marks of resistance, self-mastery and agency.<sup>53</sup> This all raises questions of theodicy, of

51 For this understanding of the potential of force, see Simone Weil, *L'Iliade ou le poème de la force*, as published in Simone Weil, *The Iliad or the Poem of Force* (ed. James P. Holoka; Lang: Frankfurt, 2003).

52 Stephen D. Moore, *God's Gym. Divine Male Bodies of the Bible* (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 22-30, Moore refers in particular to Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (trans. Alan Sheridan; New York: Vintage, 1977).

53 Quoting Stephen D. Moore ('Revolted Revelations', in Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger (ed.), *The Personal Voice in Biblical Interpretation* [London: Routledge, 1998], p. 197 n. 8, Frilingos states that the Apocalypse 'defends passive resistance as a legitimate masculine stance' (Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire*, p. 78). Frilingos also states that the (apparently) 'submissive' position of the addressees of the Apocalypse is a consequence of their following of the Lamb: 'Revelation's "most terrible drama" pushed the members of its audience to the very precipice of self-control, raising up the Lamb's grotesque body before their eyes,

course, but, if one would want to address these, one must also keep in mind that the account of the Apocalypse is a fictionalized account of reality, in which suffering not only happens but also happens due to Christians' relationship to God (thus already making the experience of suffering part of the experience of this relationship). And this suffering is, through the rhetorical strategy of the Apocalypse of John, denied an ultimately destructive power but transformed and integrated into the divine-human relationship. This transformation, rather than the question of who causes suffering, is of importance.

Should the above made an odd impression, it should be underlined that this rhetorical (and spiritual) tactic stands to reason in a situation of marginalization, suffering and powerlessness, given that it reinterprets suffering and redistributes agency. Accordingly, the experience of suffering becomes, in a way, sacramental, a way of relating to God bodily rather than a way of being separated from God. In fact, attachment to, even dependence on, God is quite fundamental and provides the Apocalypse of John with a vantage point for reevaluating its context. As Coakley puts it, '[I]f our fundamental and *practiced* dependency is on God, there is the fulcrum from which our (often necessary) dependencies on others may be assessed with critical discernment'.<sup>54</sup> The result of this in the Apocalypse of John is a possible, but precarious tactic, to be sure, given that as soon as this 'sacramental' or 'fetishized' interpretation/experience of suffering breaks down, the problem of suffering returns and separation from God or faith in God may well be imminent. The violent rhetoric of the Apocalypse of John, with all the urgency that it has, may well be indicative of an awareness of this precariousness. At this point the analogy with contemporary sadomasochism also breaks down, given that the Apocalypse of John fetishizes pain/suffering that is inflicted anyway and puts an alternative and subversive rhetorical spin on it, precisely through a highly evocative and pictorial reinterpretation of the 'spectacle' of suffering and persecution that it suggests is out there. It engages in a veritable 'revision' of the world,<sup>55</sup> thus reclaiming agency and control, equalizing the relationship between persecutor and persecuted, but does not really control the persecution as such (there is no 'safe word') and it is not undergone voluntarily *per se*; this makes it dif-

---

supporting their struggle to attain a righteous masculinity. Indeed ... for many ancient Christians this finally was the great challenge of their faith: to look closely and to follow the Lamb wherever it goes' (Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire*, p. 115).

54 Sarah Coakley, 'Prologue: Powers and Submissions', *Powers and Submissions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. xx.

55 On the Apocalypse as a spectacle of sight and interpretation, see Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire*, pp. 39-42.

ferent from voluntary BDSM play.<sup>56</sup> Thus, the fetishizing of pain (that is inflicted anyway) in the Apocalypse of John represents a subversive tactic as it denies control and ultimately independent agency to those through whom the suffering is inflicted; instead, it attributes control to a higher power, with which those who suffer experience a privileged relationship (quite in line, one might suggest, along Deleuzian lines, with the passion narrative).<sup>57</sup> The torturer/persecutor becomes, to some extent, powerless, or, at least, the playing field is leveled again, as what s/he suffers in terms of pain actually becomes a source of 'spiritual' affirmation and strength. As the Apocalypse of John makes clear beyond any possible form of doubt, one ends up powerless, even destroyed, through a form of divine violence, however problematic it may be. This violence differs qualitatively from the suffering inflicted upon the followers of the Lamb, for whom it is a means of relating to God rather than a means of being utterly and completely cut off from God and being annihilated by consequence. It might not be too far-fetched at all to consider this suffering of the faithful even as a source of pleasure. This is the case, to be sure, as long as the 'spin' that the Apocalypse of John puts on the experiences of suffering remains convincing: suffering is seen as inflicted by divine permission, even if through a whole range of adversaries, and therefore not a sign of divine weakness but of divine control. This suffering can have a salvific function in the end and be experienced presently as indicative of being in relation with God, even if this relationship is experienced through 'instruments of torture' that the various apocalyptic beasts constitute. A sadomasochistic scene, indeed, it could well be argued. In line with that, it could also be observed that it is all 'scripted' and 'controlled' – that is, by the pen of the seer. In this manner, the suffering that is inflicted can be coped with, in the sense that it can be controlled.<sup>58</sup> A different way of putting it would be to say that suffering is ritualized and in that manner

56 See also the narrative provided in Newmahr, *Playing on the Edge*, which has its basis in participant observation research in the SM scene, particularly the complex interplay between voluntary surrender, powerlessness and reflection (which implies subjectivity and agency).

57 As it appears in Boer, 'YHWH as Top', p. 93, where the suggestion that the passion narrative has sadomasochistic overtones is answered by Deleuze (as presented by Boer) with 'Indeed it is ... for not only is suffering valorized as never before, but it is willed submission, in total submission. Further, it is a suffering and submission that becomes the model for all believers who follow. They must imitate Christ ... who is the basis of a new covenant'.

58 Freeman argues in her chapter on sadomasochism that such sex play can indeed provide (historicized) models for coping with trauma; see Freeman, *Time Bind*, pp. 137-69.



integrated in the (cultic) relationship between devotee and deity. This is as true for the imperial cult, say, in Asia Minor, as it is for the cult of Christ.<sup>59</sup>

All of this, it ought to be underlined, does not imply a glorification of or indulging in suffering as such. Quite the contrary, the approach of the Apocalypse of John seems to be too contextual for that. Its subversive fetishizing of suffering and pain is a response to concrete suffering that is happening or will happen soon anyway, not suffering or pain that is sought after for the sake of salvation. It is 'only' given a meaning by putting a rhetorical and theological spin on it.<sup>60</sup> To be sure, this tactic can be made fruitful in situations of contemporary uncontrollable suffering as well, but that is not the topic of this paper; such considerations of human suffering as Simone Weil's, arguing for an embrace of it, but one *sub specie aeternitatis* with no denial of it, might provide further analogies for understanding what goes on in the Apocalypse of John.<sup>61</sup> The rhetorical 'spin' that the Apocalypse puts on suffering in the context of the divine-human relationship may well provide food for broader ideological and theological reflection than can be offered here, particularly with regard to the role of God in the Apocalypse of John. What does it really mean for God's being in charge, coupled with God's apparent desire for relationship and communion with human beings, that the site of its performance is precisely human vulnerability? Does the deity not place the outcome of its salvific plans in the hands of these human beings as much as in its own hands? A 'dominant', to borrow from sadomasochistic terminology, is not in control absolutely, but is limited precisely by the limits that the vulnerability of the 'submissive' (who is at least partially, and sometimes even fully, in charge). Both are dependent on the willingness of the other to play the game and their respective roles. (Revelation 13.9-10 may actually sound like the rules of a game: 'Let anyone who has an ear listen: If you are to be taken captive, into captivity you go; if you kill with the sword, with the sword you must be killed. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints'.<sup>62</sup>) This may well be considered further in reflections on divine control and power in divine-human relationships, if one takes a cue

59 See Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire*, p. 23.

60 Such is not to be belittled, given that any kind of death could be framed in multiple ways. See the examples that Frilingos () offers concerning Christian martyrs, either seen as a less than a cheap gladiator from an outsider's perspective) or a witness to the Lord of all from an insider's perspective (*Spectacles of Empire*, pp. 27-35, esp. pp. 27-28).

61 See Weil, *The Iliad or the Poem of Force*, pp. 42-43. See in general also Stuart Jesson, 'Simone Weil: Suffering, Attention, and Compassionate Thought', *Christian Ethics* 27 (2014), pp. 185-201.

62 Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire*, p. 85.



from the Apocalypse of John and its (re)construction of divine-human relationships in the context of (perceived) pain and suffering.

As a consequence of the important role of suffering in the Apocalypse of John, the body, although it is suffering and although positive value is attributed to this suffering, also plays a very positive role in the 'spirituality' of the Book of Revelation. It is anything but pushed aside to the benefit of, for example, the 'spiritual' or the 'soul'. Reflection on this is necessary, given that suffering is (virtually) always (also) bodily (in the broad sense of the word, the body in its physical, social, psychological and economic dimensions). Both lenses used in this study, the dynamics of sadomasochism and of torture, have also everything to do with bodily practices. When it comes to divine-human relationships, the body is always of concern, given that there is no such thing as an unmediated divine-human communication, which, because its necessarily sensory nature, always involves the body, even if it seems to be concerned primarily with noetic or interior experiences. In other words, the persecuted, suffering body is, through the fetishizing of this suffering and the appertaining reordering of agency, in the Apocalypse of John is precisely a 'means of grace', in the sense of a means for the performance and development of the divine-human relationship. Accordingly, the suffering body becomes a place for divine-human intimacy.<sup>63</sup> For this to happen in the context of (perceived) persecution, fetishizing bodily suffering, analogous to the way in which this takes place in sadomasochistic practices and relationships, is a necessity. There is a kind of salvific game of bondage, involving the body as a means of grace or – should one even dare to say? – a sacrament. Despite all that is inflicted on bodies in the Apocalypse of John, it appears that bodies and bodily experience are of very high importance in the work and, therefore, on the (Christian) identities to be modeled on it.<sup>64</sup>

63 This may bear some analogy to other reinterpretations of (seemingly) uncontrollable suffering in the history of Christianity, from depictions of a suffering Christ in the context of the plague, or the 'spin' that saints like Liduina of Schiedam put on the suffering that befell her. On the latter, see Fred Smit, 'De heilige Liduina van Schiedam', *Batavia Sacra* (Amersfoort: Stichting Centraal Oud-Katholiek Boekhuis, 1992), pp. 175-86.

64 Frilingos writes, 'Martyr accounts not only encouraged Christians who faced oppression, they also promoted a particular representation of Christianity, a religious identity that took shape especially in the tales about persecution. By encountering these narratives, the audience came to identify the ideal Christian with the mangled flesh of martyrs' (Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire*, p. 118:).

## Concluding Remarks

Having reached the end of this experimental journey through sadomasochism, the rituality of torture, the interpretation of pain, and the Apocalypse of John, conclusions can be brief, in as far as they pertain to the more methodological questions formulated at the outset. First, it seems that the bodies of theory that this essay draws upon indeed have a heuristic function in the sense that questions concerning suffering of the faithful in the Apocalypse of John can be analyzed with more insight than thus far. Second, it also seems that the result of all of this is the thesis that suffering has a quasi-sacramental function in the Apocalypse of John, given that the suffering body of a follower of the Lamb is a means for the mediation of the divine-human relationship, and that this is a subversive tactic. Through his literary endeavor, the author of the Apocalypse of John sees not just light at the end of the tunnel or light in the darkness of suffering, but turns this darkness into a source of light itself. The Apocalypse then invites others to follow and be among the faithful: reclaiming agency vis-à-vis those oppressing them in the process and creatively reshaping their relationship to God, followers of the Lamb can find meaning and self-esteem (pride?). In the Apocalypse, 'worthiness stems from experiencing pain'.<sup>65</sup> In doing so, the Apocalypse of John is revealed as a piece of creative writing in the literal sense of the word; it aims at overcoming the destructive force of pain.<sup>66</sup> A potential gain of engaging in this process for the reader would be regaining agency, overcoming paralyzing fear, and playing a role as a subject again.

65 Powery, 'Painful Praise', p. 73.

66 See Scarry, *Body in Pain*. Frilingos states, 'The symbol of the Lamb is evidence that nascent Christianity was "able to sublimate and highly differentiate itself from the socio-cultural world outside"' (Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire*, p. 76; citing J.A. du Rand, 'The Imagery of the Heavenly Jerusalem (Revelation 21:9-22:5)', *Neot* 22 [1988], pp. 65-86 [73]).